

Building Communities' Capacity to Grow in the Face of Shocks and Stresses

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Introduction

This framework helps national service project sponsors design effective, efficient poverty reduction projects and programs in a time when the shocks and stresses that disproportionately impact poor people are becoming more frequent, more severe, and less predictable. The Framework applies research and practice from the Community Resilience field in the context of the AmeriCorps VISTA program model. However, it is relevant for other types of national service programs, and aligns with other fields whose research and practice increase the capacity of communities to grow in the face of shocks and stresses.

Guiding Principles

Effective, long-term poverty reduction requires communities to anticipate, prepare for, and adapt to changing conditions. Communities that anticipate, prepare, and adapt are better able to withstand, respond to, and recover rapidly from shocks and stresses. This lifts people out of poverty by breaking the “vulnerability-impact cycle.” In this cycle, when a vulnerable individual or community experiences a shock or stress, they are unable to return to the level on which they were functioning before the shock or stress impacted them. This leaves them even more vulnerable to the next shock or stress that comes along. Consider this example: a low income family spends their entire savings repairing a storm-damaged home. They don’t have the knowledge or funds to include enhanced storm protection measures in the repairs. When the next storm hits, they experience the same or worse damage. This time they don’t even have savings left to make repairs, leaving them even more vulnerable.

Some shocks and stresses, such as low literacy levels, can be avoided, or their severity decreased, through traditional national service work. However, global changes are making shocks and stresses like extreme weather, energy insecurity, and unemployment harder to avoid, more connected, more frequent, and more severe. There is also increasing uncertainty about when and how people will experience them. Therefore, communities need additional capacity to prepare for, withstand, and recover from these enhanced shocks and stresses. Building this enhanced capacity requires the following:

- ❖ Looking at problems and solutions holistically: This means addressing the multitude of interconnected risks a community faces. Understanding how different risks play off one another is critical for truly understanding a community’s problems, including what puts and keeps people in poverty. It also means articulating and leveraging the co-benefits offered by strategies that mitigate those risks. Capitalizing on co-benefits creates efficient and effective projects, and increases stakeholder buy-in.
- ❖ Planning for uncertainty: Integrating projects into, or fostering, local, organizational, or regional planning processes ensures that projects are aligned with community-wide outcomes. Incorporating into those plans projections, based on best-available science, about the future

severity and frequency of shocks and stresses ensures enduring relevance of projects and helps the community avoid decisions that could harm lives and livelihoods down the road.

- ❖ **Engaging whole community:** This means bringing together unlike parties across multiple disciplines and breaking down silos. It means gaining the support of and including the entire spectrum of community members, especially low-income residents. Diversity of stakeholders encourages innovation, augments available resources, and improves project sustainability.

The work described in this document is embodied by two sets of complementary core values:

AmeriCorps VISTA Core Principles and the [City Resilience Framework](#) **Qualities of Resilient Systems**.

Those who are soliciting, granting, or implementing projects in this space should familiarize themselves with the core values, and seek to integrate them into project design and communications.

AmeriCorps VISTA Core Principles	Qualities of Resilient Systems
<p>Anti-Poverty Focus: AmeriCorps VISTA supports community efforts to overcome poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, or tribal or public agency with a project explicitly designed to alleviate poverty may sponsor an AmeriCorps VISTA Member.</p> <p>Community Empowerment: AmeriCorps VISTA values the inherent strengths and resources of the community. AmeriCorps VISTA expects project sponsors to involve residents of the community in planning, developing, and implementing the AmeriCorps VISTA project. This approach allows low-income individuals the freedom to speak for themselves in determining the projects that suit their specific needs.</p> <p>Capacity Building: AmeriCorps VISTA expands the ability of sponsor organizations to fight poverty. Members strengthen and support organizations by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, coordinating training for participants, and much more. These</p>	<p>Inclusive: Inclusion emphasizes the need for broad consultation and engagement of communities, including the most vulnerable groups. Addressing the shocks or stresses faced by one sector, location, or community in isolation of others is an anathema to the notion of resilience. An inclusive approach contributes to a sense of shared ownership or a joint vision to build resilience.</p> <p>Integrated: Integration and alignment between systems promotes consistency in decision-making and ensures that all investments are mutually supportive to a common outcome. Integration is evident within and between resilient systems, and across different scales of their operation. Exchange of information between systems enables them to function collectively and respond rapidly through shorter feedback loops throughout the community.</p> <p>Redundant: Redundancy refers to spare capacity purposely created within systems so that they can accommodate disruption, extreme pressures or surges in demand. It includes diversity: the presence of multiple ways to achieve a given need or fulfil a particular function. Examples include distributed infrastructure networks and resource reserves. Redundancies should be intentional, cost-effective and prioritized at a community-wide scale, and should not be an externality of inefficient design.</p> <p>Robust: Robust systems include well-conceived, constructed and managed physical assets, so that they can withstand the impacts of hazard events without significant damage or loss of function. Robust design anticipates potential failures in systems, making provision to ensure failure is predictable, safe, and not disproportionate to the cause. Over-reliance on a single asset, cascading failure and design thresholds that might lead to catastrophic collapse if exceeded are actively avoided.</p> <p>Resourceful: Resourcefulness implies that people and institutions are able to rapidly find different ways to achieve their goals or meet their needs during a shock or when under stress. This may include investing in capacity to anticipate future conditions, set priorities, and respond, for example, by mobilizing and coordinating wider human, financial and physical resources. Resourcefulness is instrumental to a city's ability to restore functionality of critical systems, potentially under severely constrained conditions.</p> <p>Reflective: Reflective systems are accepting of the inherent and ever-increasing uncertainty and change in today's world. They have mechanisms to continuously evolve, and will modify</p>

<p>capacity-building activities enable organizations to provide better services to low-income individuals and communities.</p> <p>Sustainable Solutions: AmeriCorps VISTA Members serve as a short-term resource to help sponsor organizations achieve lasting solutions to poverty.</p>	<p>standards or norms based on emerging evidence, rather than seeking permanent solutions based on the status quo. As a result, people and institutions examine and systematically learn from their past experiences, and leverage this learning to inform future decision-making.</p> <p>Flexible: Flexibility implies that systems can change, evolve and adapt in response to changing circumstances. This may favor decentralized and modular approaches to infrastructure or ecosystem management. Flexibility can be achieved through the introduction of new knowledge and technologies, as needed. It also means considering and incorporating indigenous or traditional knowledge and practices in new ways.</p>
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Resilient systems exhibit certain qualities
that enable them to withstand, respond, and adapt
more readily to shocks and stresses

Reflective	Resourceful	Robust	Redundant	Flexible	Inclusive	Integrated
Ability to learn and act	...conceiving systems & assets that can withstand shocks & stresses as well as using alternative strategies to facilitate rapid recovery			...planned to take account of community-wide needs and promote coordinated actions	

Graphic: The Rockefeller Foundation

Program Guidelines

When CNCS began pursuing work to help communities grow in the face of shocks and stresses, it set up a valuable program structure that offers benefits to members and sponsors beyond the traditional benefits of being a part of the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Those benefits could be replicated for any national service program seeking to do this type of work.

Training and Technical Assistance: Members, sponsors, and the communities they serve receive additional Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA), including a tailored online learning experience on the VISTA campus, [access to technical assistance providers](#), and a mentorship program for national service members.

Peer Learning Community: Those engaged in this work have access to facilitated peer learning opportunities to share accomplishments, challenges, and ideas. These opportunities happen through [online forums](#) and one-on-one communication. Program participants also receive facilitated connections to advanced practitioners in their local or regional area.

Project amplification opportunities: projects have enhanced opportunities to share and amplify their accomplishments through a Community Newsletter, and communications mechanisms of national service agencies and partners.

In order to fully realize these benefits, and to ensure the continuation of the program, sponsors agree to:

- encourage their members to take advantage of training and technical assistance opportunities;
- engage national service agencies and technical assistance providers to inform them about project needs, and provide feedback on trainings, tools, and resources to help improve their utility and usability for local communities;
- respond to communication requests from national service agencies and partners to facilitate project amplification; and
- be active participants in the program community to facilitate peer learning and program improvement.

Project Development Guide

This section provides suggested outcome areas, challenges, solutions, populations, strategies, and activities that align well with projects aimed at increasing communities' capacity to grow in the face of shocks and stresses. This section may be particularly useful for national service project sponsors as they develop their projects, and sponsors and site supervisors as they develop assignment descriptions for national service members.

Outcome areas

Projects that help communities build capacity to grow in the face of shocks and stresses tend to drive towards one or more of the following outcomes:

- Reduced vulnerability: Projects reduce long-term social, economic, environmental, or infrastructure vulnerabilities. For example, upgrades that protect affordable housing from extreme weather damage.
- Increased preparedness: Projects increase individual or community preparedness by building capacity for organizations and individuals to undertake pre-event actions. Examples of pre-event actions include: developing household or business emergency plans, or securing backup energy, communication, food or water supplies.
- Facilitated long-term recovery: Projects increase communities' capacity to implement coordinated recovery efforts that meet the needs of low-income residents, create jobs, and increase public safety.
- Increased risk awareness: Projects reach marginalized populations with risk information that they can understand, and that incites them to take protective action.
- Improved access to social services: ensuring low income communities have access to the services needed to break the vulnerability-impact cycle.

Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, and Activities

National service projects respond to needs identified by the sponsor. A project may stem from a desire to address a specific challenge (or set of challenges). Alternatively, it may stem from a desire to propagate a specific solution or a desire to assist a specific low-income population. Similarly, while most projects utilize a variety of capacity-building strategies, a project may stem from a desire to employ a *specific* capacity-building strategy. In multi-site projects, the activities at each site are designed to address local challenges, solutions, or populations within the larger project context.

There are a diversity of challenges that national service projects designed to increase communities' capacity to grow in the face of shocks and stresses may address. Some that have been addressed in the past include:

- Extreme weather, severe storms
- Flooding and stormwater
- Financial insecurity

- Aging, insufficient, or unsafe infrastructure
- Disasters
- Coastal hazards
- Inadequate nutrition, nutrition-related health problems
- Loss of traditional knowledge
- Threats to natural and cultural resources
- Energy insecurity

There are several solutions that national service projects designed to increase communities' capacity to grow in the face of shocks and stresses may address. The first table below includes some that have been addressed in the past.

There are four key capacity-building strategies and associated activities that are particularly suited to increase communities' capacity to grow in the face of shocks and stresses: understand, plan, engage & collaborate, and educate & communicate. There are additional traditional capacity building strategies that national service projects in this space will need to employ in order to be successful. All of these strategies and associated activities are listed in the second table below.

Many of the solutions and strategies listed below tie to indicators enumerated in the draft interagency concept: [Community Resilience Indicators and National-Level Measures](#), and in the [City Resilience Index](#). Sponsors are encouraged to explore these two documents in more detail. Frameworks such as these help organizations articulate resilience in a measurable, evidence-based way. The documents provide suggestions for how to design projects and collect data towards this end.

Example indicators adapted from these documents are listed alongside their corresponding solution or strategy in the tables below. Sponsors may wish to use these example indicators to help them think about how they might measure and communicate project achievements. Example indicators are not meant to be interpreted as reporting requirements. In some cases they do complement national service performance measures, however.

1. Solutions

Sample solution	Example indicators
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing condition • Housing affordability • Appropriate codes, standards, and enforcement
First-generation banking access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive financing mechanisms
Green infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wetlands conservation • Effective sanitation • Flexible infrastructure services • Robust protective infrastructure • Effectively managed protective ecosystems

Transit and walkability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Roadway Conditions ● Transportation Connectivity ● Transit Accessibility
Urban agriculture and healthy food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Healthy behaviors ● Sufficient affordable food supply
Natural resource restoration, preservation, and exploitation of co-benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Water conservation ● Wetlands conservation ● Forest conservation ● Habitat quality ● Environmental health ● Effective stewardship of ecosystems ● Effectively managed protective ecosystems
Youth and workforce development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inclusive labor policies ● Relevant skills and training ● Diverse economic base
Energy efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adequate affordable energy supply ● Retained spare capacity

2. Strategies and Activities

Strategy and Associated Activities	Example indicators
<p>Understand hazards, vulnerabilities, risks, and assets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assess community risks: identify or map community hazards; identify or map the vulnerabilities of low-income residents ● Identify or map community assets, including people, institutions, networks, and physical infrastructure ● Assess barriers to improving resilience of low income residents ● Assess low income residents' knowledge of risks in their community ● Make use of Traditional Knowledges (TK) when appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Comprehensive hazard and exposure mapping ● Risk identification ● Risk data
<p>Plan: Enhance or enable holistic, integrated planning that addresses uncertainty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contribute to long-term community resilience planning. If no long-term planning efforts are underway, begin developing a long-term community resilience plan or strategic preparedness plan. ● Advocate for best practices in community resilience planning, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ensuring that low income residents' needs are identified and addressed ○ Incorporating projections, based on best-available science, about the future nature and severity of hazards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appropriate land use and zoning ● Enforcement of planning and development regulations ● Contingency planning ● Continuity of operations during shocks and stresses
<p>Engage and collaborate: Conduct multi-stakeholder engagement and create</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cohesive communities

<p>networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct community outreach to hear resident concerns about shocks and stresses, and ideas about how to build resilience. Include representatives from many sectors, including civil society, government, and business. ● Serve as a liaison for community resilience thinking, and incorporate that thinking into project design and implementation. For example, encourage the community to articulate and leverage resilience co-benefits of existing and new initiatives. ● Cultivate partnerships and collaboration across sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Actively engaged citizens ● Effective mechanisms for communities to engage with organizations in power
<p>Educate and Communicate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Design and deliver public education on community resilience-building activities ● Effectively communicate risk to target populations through best practices such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identifying existing risk information appropriate for the target population ○ Determining effective communications channels for targeted populations ○ Cultural competency: Learning about and being sensitive to cultural norms that may impact engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Widespread community risk awareness ● Widespread community preparedness ● Adequate education for all
<p>Other Traditional Capacity-Building Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recruit and effectively manage volunteers for resilience-building activities ● Train employees, community members, and volunteers for resilience-building activities ● Expand provision of services that help increase community resilience ● Identify funding for resilience projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased civic capacity and social connectedness ● Diverse methods for service provision ● Increased affordability of services ● Cohesive communities ● Actively engaged citizens

National service project sponsors, Members, and Supervisors can find training and information resources relevant to each of the challenges, solutions, strategies and activities enumerated above, as well as specific vulnerable populations, on the [VISTA Virtual Campus resilience resources inventory](#).

Sample Projects

Below are examples of current national service projects that are increasing communities' capacity to grow in the face of shocks and stresses. The draft interagency concept: [Community Resilience Indicators and National-Level Measures](#) provides a great deal of evidence and analysis for how projects like these lead to better outcomes in communities. Excerpts of that analysis is included here.

Project Sponsor: Enterprise Community Partners, Indian Country

Specific Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, or Populations: climate-related impacts, housing, tribal

Project Description: This project builds the capacity of tribes to develop and preserve their housing stock in a climate and culturally resilient manner, preparing their staff to handle emergencies and ensure their residents remain safe. The overall goal is to increase the supply of affordable, culturally appropriate housing located in connected Communities of Opportunity. This includes increasing the supply of multi-family housing opportunities for homeownership and providing permanent supportive housing for the homeless. As described in the Federal Resilience Indicators report, "People living without permanent housing, and people living in substandard housing, may be more susceptible to the impacts of hazards, resulting in injury, death, or property damage...Communities taking actions to reduce homelessness and high concentrations of substandard housing are increasing community resilience capacity by improving housing quality and reducing the housing-related disaster vulnerabilities."

Project Sponsor: Cities of Service

Specific Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, or Populations: food insecurity, urban agriculture, recruit and manage volunteers

Project Description: The Cities of Service Resilience AmeriCorps VISTA project places members in local governments to increase the capacity of city resilience planning and project implementation. Members are working on several vulnerability-reduction efforts throughout the country, including:

- Phoenix, AZ: In Phoenix, extreme heat is an increasing hazard, as are associated heat illness and deaths. Low income residents are particularly vulnerable, with fewer resources to keep cool. The City of Phoenix Resilience AmeriCorps VISTA Members are working on a city wide initiative called "We're Cool" to decrease low income residents' vulnerability to extreme heat. The campaign increases use and effectiveness of cooling stations for low income workers who rely on public transit to commute to their jobs.
- El Paso, TX: In El Paso, many low income residents live in food deserts, increasing health problems and vulnerability to shocks and stresses that impact food access. Members here are increasing capacity for healthy, local food production by helping institute a municipal urban agriculture policy, promoting an adopt-a-lot program for community garden siting, and managing volunteers building demonstration community gardens.

Project Sponsor: Catholic Charities USA

Specific Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, or Populations: disasters, risk communication, persons with limited English proficiency

Project Description: Effectively communicating risk is the first step towards risk awareness, a critical component of resilience capacity. Catholic Charities USA manages 10 Resilience AmeriCorps sites across the country. The CCUSA Resilience AmeriCorps VISTA project is designed to build community capacity to effectively communicate in high natural hazard disaster risk areas with persons with limited English proficiency (LEP). AmeriCorps VISTA members help local emergency management become equipped to build communication systems with LEP populations. They assess cultural and language barriers to effective disaster preparedness, build partnerships, and create momentum for community engagement.

Project Sponsor: Tribal College Resilience Initiative

Specific Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, or Populations: loss of traditional knowledge, climate-related impacts, engage and collaborate, plan, tribal

Project Description: Tribal communities are among the poorest in the nation and the most vulnerable to climate change. They also often have specific challenges in building capacity to address pending threats. The Native Climate Resilience Network is a coordinated effort across Tribal communities to identify and plan and prepare for local climate change issues. Members work with Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) on site specific projects that integrate traditional, culturally specific ecological knowledge with western science practice in an effort to plan for locally identified climate change issues and to strengthen and develop partnerships with climate change experts.

Project Sponsor: New York Governor's Office of Storm Recovery

Specific Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, or Populations: flooding and stormwater, coastal hazards, green infrastructure, plan, engage and collaborate

Project Description: AmeriCorps VISTA members support community-created storm recovery projects conceptualized with the NY Rising Community Reconstructions (NYRCR) Program. The NYRCR Program is a participatory recovery and resiliency initiative established to provide assistance to 124 communities severely damaged by Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Irene, and Tropical Storm Lee. AmeriCorps VISTA members engage with local partners to implement resiliency projects, as well as develop outreach strategies to build community and infrastructure resilience in the face of severe storms.

Project Sponsor: Lutheran Services in America, St. Paul MN

Specific Challenges, Solutions, Strategies, or Populations: severe storms, youth and workforce development, understand, educate and communicate

Project Description: As described in the Federal Resilience Indicators report, "Individual mental and physical health and resilience is important for community resilience because healthy, socially connected, prepared people make for stronger communities that are better able to withstand, manage, and recover from shocks and stresses...Promoting wellness and encouraging healthy behaviors alongside disaster preparedness can help communities face everyday challenges as well as major disruptions or disasters." Working with Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota, an AmeriCorps VISTA member is expanding community resiliency in low-income communities by improving the psychological health of children and families, provide education and emotional support for children to make them more self-sufficient and

aware of risks, and enhance resources available for children and families recovering from disruptive life events.